

Lights and Shadows

Volume 29 *Lights and Shadows* Volume 29

Article 30

1985

The Last Talk

Debby Ausmus

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.una.edu/lightsandshadows>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ausmus, D. (1985). The Last Talk. *Lights and Shadows*, 29 (1). Retrieved from <https://ir.una.edu/lightsandshadows/vol29/iss1/30>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by UNA Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Lights and Shadows by an authorized editor of UNA Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact jpate1@una.edu.

The Last Talk

Debby Ausmus

Short Story/Third Place, Tie

"Well, here I am," I sighed to myself as I pulled into the parking lot. I slipped the gear shift into park slowly, one notch at a time, as if the device had its own will to fight against all my efforts. As my firm grip released from the lever, my body eased back into the New Yorker's plush seat. My body released a long sigh protruding my lower lip and drifted upward forcing my auburn locks to fan about my forehead like a flag signaling for help. I was early, but that was what I wanted. I had to talk to Dad alone.

Moments passed as I sat there glaring at the stone building in front of my car. My body was motionless like a stone carving except for the slow expansion of my chest each time I drew a breath. Yet, my mind raced from one thought to another like a racquetball court in heated action. Each thought bounced off one side of my mind to another and to another and to another until suddenly, with all this abundant energy built up, I jerked open the car door and swung my body around as if the car seat was a pivot and landed my feet on the gravel below. I sat there grinding my heels in the small stones, listening to the sound like ice crunching between my teeth, until the chime reminding me that my keys were still in the ignition irritated me enough to jerk them out and force myself on my feet.

Well, the first major step was accomplished; I was out of my car and on my feet. I locked the car door as I closed it shut and rested my body against it as if to guard it from springing open. As I turned toward the building, I brushed my hair back and slid my purse under my arm. It was time for me to go in, now.

As I walked up the sidewalk, I ignored the world around me with its passing traffic and conversing people. My full concentration was only distracted by the autumn breeze blowing against my body and by my heels clacking on the concreted sidewalks like the sound of a blacksmith hammering on his anvil. With each step, my legs felt weaker and weaker as if a gigantic magnet lay beneath the sidewalk and drew my strength out of each step.

As I pushed myself up the front steps, the next obstacle came into view. It was the doors. These huge, double doors, made out of sturdy, dense wood decorated with brass handles and latches and brass door knockers, dared to overwhelm me like the first hurdle in a runner's race. My hand wrapped tightly around the metal handle as my thumb overlay the latch. My body shivered as I tried to assure myself saying, "You can do it. Just squeeze down on the latch and open the door. You can do it, girl." Again, I took a deep breath and squeezed the latch much like the way a man squeezes a beer can into a crushed mass, until I heard the click of the door bolt inside. As I pulled open the door, I felt the suction of the door frame releasing the door like that of a plunger, as my focus was vacuumed into the entrance of the building.

The lobby was gloomy like a dark cavern and I began to wonder if the doors had ever been open before I came along. There were no overhead lights; just two lamp stands on opposite ends of the room. Yet, one of the lamps had three bulbs in it which illuminated its side of the lobby a little brighter than the other. A modern highback, musty gold chair stood out from the rest of the mossy green furniture that appeared as if they came out of a 1955 Sears and Roebuck catalogue. The gold chair was on the darker side of the room as if to balance out the decor. Above the couches were two Dollar General Store scenery paintings that looked like they were glued to the wall at their crooked angle just to catch your attention. Still yet, there was another strangeness that enveloped the whole area. It was the smell. The odor that slapped you in the face was like a combination of Glade's Rose Garden air freshener and Black Flag's roach bomb. It was a stench that would be remembered forever.

"May I help you?"

Startled, I whirled around only to find a short, middle-aged man in a gray, pin-striped suit with a loud burgundy tie. His solemn smile was draped with an uneven, dark mustache that leaned to the left like a set of balancing scales with its heaviest weight in the left tray. Protruding above his mustache was his slender nose that seemed to grow from his grossly thick eyebrows. As I looked into his bulging, brown eyes with dark sags underneath, I was reminded of Sam, our St. Bernard. As I studied this person standing before me, pigeon toed with his hands clasped in front of his groin, he asked again, "Miss, may I help you?"

I cleared my throat and tried to compose myself as I replied, "Yes, I'm here to see Robert Aycock."

"Chapel B," he said as he released his clasp and as his left arm remained in its prior position, the right arm swung away from his body to point me in the correct direction. His head, which had followed the swaying arm, now turned toward me again with his unusual smile.

"Thank you," I mumbled as I nodded my head in appreciation and walked away toward the hall entrance. Even though this comical man had taken my mind off of it, for a few minutes, I soon remembered why I was here. My heart beat faster and seemed to swell in my chest with all the blood it pumped, like a sponge enlarges when it absorbs water. Still, I walked down the long hallway in search of Chapel B.

Soon I stopped for there it was; "Chapel B" was engraved in a small, gold plaque above an open entrance into the requested chapel. My heart was now pounding so fast that my blouse vibrated from the overaction. My face was flushed as a child with a fever. I leaned my body against the wall beside the entrance for I knew that the magnet that had been under the sidewalk was now under the hallway draining out what little strength I had left. The wall was as comforting as a blanket is on a wintery night. I felt as if I could rest there forever, but I knew I had to go on.

Finally, I stood erect and, while clutching my purse with both hands, I walked around the corner, still staring at the well-worn carpet beneath my feet, and stood inside the doorway. I took another deep breath and eased my focus from the carpet to my father, a few feet away. A misty haze blurred my eyesight thickly like the fog in the hills of east Tennessee in the early mornings. Then, suddenly, a flow of tears flooded from my swollen eyes like a dam bursts overflowing from its reservoir, as the swelling of my heart decreased. "Oh, God!" I cried, sobbing loudly. As I tightened my grip on my purse, I walked up the aisle where his body lay. For awhile, I just stood there letting my tears flow until I felt that the pressure from within had subsided to a minimal throb. Then, I threw my head back, rubbed my face and eyes on the sleeve of my dress with one sweep and forced a smile across my face.

"Hey, Daddy," I said quietly and waited for his response. His smooth lips remained still and his face remained expressionless. "This is your little girl." I just knew he'd open his eyes and speak now. I glanced from his face to his chest and almost swore I saw his chest expand. "It's okay, Daddy," I said as if to reassure him, "We're alone. I came early because I wanted this time alone, just you and me, so we could talk." As I realized that he wasn't going to respond, I felt the tears coming again but I forced them back by blinking my eyes and sniffing my nose. "You sure do look handsome with that blue suit on. It always did go well with your dark complexion and it enhanced your blue eyes, too. Oh, Daddy, I'll never forget your big, loving blue eyes. If I could only see them once more."

I made another sweep across my face with my arm, returned my now crumpled purse to its original position under my arm and proceeded with my conversation. "Bobby's coming home tonight. He couldn't get an earlier flight. Linda and the baby are staying behind, but they wished they could come. Linda sends their love. Mom's doing better than expected. Don't worry, Daddy, Bobby and I will take good care of her. Next week she's going to stay with Bobby and Linda for awhile. It's been a few months since the last visit and besides, Bobby and I thought that she should get away from the house so she wouldn't be reminded of...what happened."

Tears again began to flow but not as aggressively as before. I shifted my weight from both feet to just one side and relaxed my tense body like a soldier when his commanding officer gives the order, "At ease." My eyesight crept across his body inch by inch as if it were a work of art. I noticed how the expression on his face was relaxed like he was peacefully sleeping and how his thick, auburn hair, the same color as mine, was combed perfectly in place. Then I studied his broad shoulders and pictured his muscular arms underneath his suit. As I glanced across his blue suit and his blue dotted white tie, my eyes focused on the tie clasp; it was the present I gave him one Christmas when I was nine. He had on a vest, too. Man, I remember how he hated vests but always liked for you to say how nice he looked in them.

*The lobby was
gloomy like a dark
cavern and I began
to wonder if the
doors had ever been
open before I came
along.*

Then I came to his hands. Oh, what mighty hands. Why, I remember that these hands used to be as strong as oak. As I rested my hand upon his, I felt a chill go through my spine. This once warm and loving hand felt cold and numb as when I touched my own hand when it had gone to sleep. I quickly released it and stared at it as I started to remember what a great hand this once was. This hand once held on to its father's for guidance. This hand once stole a cookie from its mother's cookie jar. This hand once carved its initials in the Hickory Hollow Sweetheart Tree. This hand once held a young lady's hand in marriage. This hand once helped cradle a newborn baby at birth. This hand once pitched a softball to its son in the backyard. This hand once wiped a tear from its daughter's eye. This hand once greeted friends and neighbors with a friendly shake. This hand...My mind rambled on and on like a locomotive chugging along and making various stops until it made a final stop. This hand had done so much, yet, I began to stare at it in anger.

"Daddy, was it this hand?"

Could it be true? Could this hand that was so loving and giving take something so selfishly away as its own life? As I stared at his hand I began questioning. "Was this the hand, Dad? Was it?" I felt my face redden and the pressure in my chest build up again. "How could you do it, Dad? How could you do this to Mother...and to Bobby? Dad, how could you do this to me!" My stern questioning began to soften, "How could you, Daddy, how could you?" I began to sob again only louder.

Just then, I felt a hand rest on my shoulder and give a squeeze so gentle as if my shoulder was as fragile as an egg shell. A soft, deep voice uttered my name, "Joan?" I brushed the tears away from my face and turned to see who it was.

My eyes met with two warm, green eyes that glistened from the tears that kept them moist like the dew on the blades of grass in the early morning. It was Philip. I wrapped my arms around his thin waist as he cradled my body like a mother cradles a child that woke from a bad dream. My body clung so tightly to his that I could feel his pounding heart beat against mine and his warm breath flow against my neck. I closed my eyes tightly and welcomed this comfort like a lost child welcomes a loved one's hug. We stood there together as one with the only sounds breaking the silence being my cry that was muffled from my face buried in his chest.

My drained, lifeless body slowly began to strengthen as his arms held me which seemed to give me back the strength that the magnet had taken away. He loosened his hold on me as I eased my grip around his waist and he kissed me lightly on the cheek. I kept one arm secured around his waist just in case the magnet decided to come back, and he hung his arm across my back and gripped my upper arm to keep me drawn close to him.

"Joan, I'm sorry."

Not knowing exactly how to respond, I just smiled and nodded my head. He moved his hand from my upper arm to the back of my neck. He massaged it tenderly as our stray hands met and toyed with each other's finger tips gently. It may have been three years since we dated, but he still knew how to make me relax and ease my tensions.

"How ya doing?" he asked with a soft, caring voice.

"I'm doing pretty good. It just all happened so fast—I don't know what to think or what to do."

"I know, I know. He had been sick for a little while now, hadn't he?" Phil asked as he stared at my father's body.

"Yes, but—"

"Maybe he just wanted to speed things up a bit," he said facing me.

"But, Phil—why?"

"For you and the rest. He probably thought about how it would be in the end and he wanted to save you the pain of—"

"Phil! He only had a mild leukemia! He had a good five to eight years left not to mention that a cure could have been developed by then. Is that so horrible that it would make you put a gun to your chest and blow your damn heart out? Is it? Is it, Phil?" I cried and searched deep into his eyes for an answer.

Phil just raised an eyebrow and shook his head. "Listen, Phil, uh—hey, I'm sorry—" I began.

"Hey, it's okay."

"Nah, really, I'm sorry. I'm just so hurt and irritated at the fact that I don't understand it all."

"I know," he said as he drew a deep breath. "Listen, I'm gonna go out and get some fresh air. Wanna come?"

"No, thanks, I want to spend a little more time with Dad alone."

"Okay, I'll talk to ya later."

"Phil? Thanks," I said with a smile.

He winked with a returned smile and backed off slowly, letting our finger tips be our last touch. Phil stood back for a minute, staring at me like a parent watching a toddler taking its first step alone, to see if I could stand alone.

I watched him leave the chapel and then noticed how the flowers lined the walls like supports to keep the walls from falling in. A slight chill crept over me like the cold winter wind blowing against you through a window sill, for the flowers reminded me that I had to turn and face my father and finish out

talk. I smiled at him and then scanned the room full of flowers again, hoping they could breathe some of their life into my father like a lost ship, tossed about at sea, scans the coastline looking for some inkling light that it might have some hope. "Boy, Dad!" I began, "You sure got the flowers! You see? People did care and love you, Daddy."

"Dad, I'm sorry...I don't understand. I've tried and I've tried to figure it out. What went wrong? What would make you do such a thing? We were so close. Why can't I figure it out?" I paused for a few minutes and stared away from him, dazed like a person under a hypnotist's spell. All I was thinking about was "why?" like it was engraved in my mind like a name on a tombstone. "Did you just give up on life, Dad? Did you think that everything would just come to a halt? Didn't you realize that our pain continues even though yours has ended? I still can't accept the fact that you would take your own life. Dad, do you realize that that is like taking something that God created, chewing it up into little pieces and spitting it back into His face? I just can't believe that you would defy God and life that way."

I stood there for awhile staring my father in the face. Then I drew a deep breath and began, "Dad, life is still going on; the sun is still going to shine tomorrow, and Christmas is still going to come, and the re-runs of "Leave It

To Beaver" will still be playing. See, Daddy, life *still* goes on. The only difference is that it's going to be a little harder on me because I won't have you to share it with me. But," I said as I placed my hand on his, "I guess I'll manage somehow, I'll—"

"Joan? Is that you?"

As I turned around, I saw Mrs. Bishop, our next door neighbor and answered, "Yes." I then turned back toward my father. "Daddy, people are starting to come in now. I didn't get much accomplished but I'm glad we had this little talk together. Mainly, I just wanted you to remember that I still love you, even after all this. I'll always remember and love you and think of you often in everything I do. Bye, Daddy," I said as I kissed my two fingers and rested them on his lips.

"Joan, sweetheart, I'm so sorry..." □